

Drawing Lessons

Drawing Friends:

This is such a lovely interplay. There is a required stillness in exchange for a kind of intimate attention, and also a type of surrender - sort of like getting a haircut. And there is a mutual independence in the gazes of the participants. You are looking at Mindy, observing the shape of her face with careful scrutiny, but are oblivious to the fact that she is rigorously watching you look at her. There is more accuracy, but less recognition. An essay comes to mind by a girl who insisted on posing for her painter boyfriend, thinking that the looking might somehow be desirous. In reality, it was not at all this kind of gazing, and she hated the objectivity with which he regarded her. There should be different words for this kind of seeing, knowing, and recognizing...

Now you are sussing the angle of Mindy's cheek as her eyes are looking down at her cell phone. She can do whatever she wants with her eyes for most of the drawing, since you'll "do" them last. She talks about her family, and her cousin named Shy. She keeps looking down. You're both quiet for a few minutes, so you work on her lips, which have a looseness to their volume that you hadn't noticed in your everyday interactions with her. She talks about the pinching game she and her brother played when they were little, decades before he would start locking himself in his room for days, tapping methodically, coming out only to ask her if she could see the alien in their living room. You're trying to "get" her glasses now. What is happening with that cat-eye shape at this angle? You've been looking at her without the kind of connectedness that comes with eye contact. Suddenly her eyelids lift and, and since you're working on the area around her eyes, she looks right at you, which seems somehow miraculous in this instance. The sentience behind the shapes is startling and you almost look away, as if you've been caught staring. She speaks to you and, although you were having a conversation only minutes ago, now there is something disarming in this, too - that these silent but specific forms you were intently rendering can blossom with the abstractness of sound. It's as if the character on the screen in the movie you were watching were to direct her lines down at you in your scratchy red theater seat, "Do you ever think that maybe you're not the best historian for your life?" Initially it feels like a psychic accusation, until you realize she's talking about herself. She's been erasing her cell phone messages and recognizing with part one of herself that she did not recall the events being mentioned in the messages, and with part two of herself that she may be erasing the only memory - tangible or otherwise - of these events. Those two selves never synchronized enough to actually stop the erasing, but that disconnect and its coy tricks on memory is familiar, however inefficient. It's how we are able to hide money from ourselves in old pants pockets, or keys on virtually any surface in the house. But it can hide bigger things, too. Mindy still feels like when she and her boyfriend broke up, he left with the only existing memories of some events they experienced together. She had trusted that she would always be able to access her grandmother through his memories of their time with her. Her own mind didn't record things in such a grounded and reliable way. She had imagined him to be her record... her drawing.



Drawing Family

Some time ago I really wanted to draw my parents. I really wanted to look at them with a cool eye and have a record of that looking. I didn't have the nerve to ask them if I could; I thought the idea of it might have made them self-conscious, which they usually weren't. Initially I thought I might just like to draw their hands. It seems like much of who some people are rests in their hands, yet my memory wrestled in vain for any image of theirs. Later, I also wanted to draw their faces. Whenever they were talking to me, I'd be thinking about drawing them, and they'd always notice I was "looking at them weird." Eventually, I wanted to draw their whole bodies, especially my Dad's, who's seemed to be changing so rapidly. For thirty-five years, the image of him in my head had been constant; now there was so much variation. Every time I came home, he had changed again. Without fair warning, the texture of his skin shifted from terra cotta to porcelain. Most of his black hair slid away and what remained slipped transparent. He had been a towering form –a six and a half foot solid structure - but now his bent knees below the hospital sheet made for flimsy, brittle teepees. And his color – he completely switched palettes. He went from fertile dirt to the desert, from warm umbers and ochres to faint yellows and pale, translucent greens. That last week there was a bruise on his neck the size of my whole hand, opaque and the color of eggplant...

I snuck into the funeral home early in the morning, an hour ahead of my family. I had wanted to be alone one last time with my Dad, or at least with the body of my Dad. I pulled a chair close to the casket and began to draw his profile. Ancient funereal traditions - death masks and encaustic portraits - made empirical sense to me in that instant. I remember feeling the kind of calmness that accompanies action born of necessity; I feared I could forget what he looked like and hoped that tracing on paper the lines of his face would commit them to my memory. I noted the long straightness of his nose, the dimple in his pillow-y earlobe, the angle of the downward turn at the corners of his mouth... I recalled several years before, in a small Peruvian town, when I'd found myself drawing quick portraits of unthinkably poor kids. A mob of them gathered around, fidgeting as patiently as they could, until it was their turn, fixing each other's hair and brushing the dried mud from their faces while they waited. They were planning on giving my crappy ballpoint pen portraits to their parents for Christmas, still six months away. One boy ran the several blocks to his home and changed from his tattered t-shirt to a light blue, too big, button-down shirt, and a too small, way too hot, yellow, crewneck sweater. He barely blinked or even breathed as I drew him, holding his stillness like a bowl of soup, with both hands.

